

Letter to the editor

Sir,

We write in reply to the editorial “*The forensic pathology initiative From Home Office pathologist to home-office pathologist?*”.

The authors quite rightly point out that “*Forensic pathology requires not only the application of sound medical science but also a full, frank, and fair presentation of both facts and opinions. . . .*”. It is therefore somewhat regrettable that their editorial is neither based in fact, nor a fair representation of the practice of forensic pathology in England and Wales.

To deal with the first inaccuracy, “*Three English University Pathology Departments (Leicester, Liverpool and Newcastle) have a forensic presence*”:- Liverpool has not had a University Sub Department of Forensic Pathology for four years. Despite discussing the situation in England and Wales, the authors seem to have forgotten there is a well established University Department in Cardiff.

Secondly, the statement that “*the Home Office is formalising a structure of single handed practitioners*” is incorrect. The Home Office, after lengthy consultations with practitioners, is formalising the provision of forensic pathology services into group practices. This is designed specifically to ensure that there is mutual support for individuals within those practices, effectively ensuring that single handed practice is a thing of the past. Forensic Pathology in England and Wales is now more regulated than at any time in its history.

It is true that single handed practitioners are a source of concern in all branches of medicine, but advances in IT such as telepathology mean that physical distance is now no longer a reason for professional isolation. Moreover, many of us have, at some stage in our careers, worked in departments where communication between colleagues is suboptimal. We have found that working in separate offices in no way inhibits effective communication. In fact, it has the benefit of reducing travelling, which is not only time efficient but also environmentally friendly. We agree that a large integrated forensic pathology department may have distinct advantages in heavily populated areas, but one must take into account the geographic and demographic make up of the United Kingdom. To ignore the potential of current technology to support colleagues in the more re-

mote regions of our Isles is luddite nonsense. To force practitioners into large departments against their will is unlikely to promote harmony in the profession. To have a forensic pathology department remote from the communities which use it is unlikely to increase the level of service to the criminal justice system within those communities.

The authors of the editorial seem unduly preoccupied with the politics behind the current provision of Forensic Pathology in England and Wales, and particularly with the financial arrangements of the individual practitioners. Unlike the authors, whom we note are both based in Scotland, most pathologists in England and Wales realise that the need to be adequately remunerated and the desire to provide a high quality service are not mutually exclusive. The key to provision of a quality service lies in personal responsibility. There is absolutely no reason why self employed practitioners cannot provide an excellent service, something which many general practitioners (GPs) have done for years.

The authors seem to imply that a university department can provide a better service than individuals in group practices. We acknowledge the contributions made to forensic pathology by university employees, and consider the mix of self employed practitioners and university staff to be of great benefit to our specialty. However, there is no objective evidence to show that a university department can provide a better service than a group practice.

In fact, a review carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary last year rated murder investigation in 2 out of the 43 Police Forces in England and Wales as “excellent”. The review process acknowledged the contribution of high quality forensic pathology services to the excellent ratings. It is interesting to note that in both the forces in question, the Metropolitan Police and Greater Manchester Police, the forensic pathology service is provided by self employed pathologists working in group practices.

The comment that “*So long as forensic pathologists provide the contracted service to their local police forces when required, there will be no limit on their other professional income generating activities*” is interesting. We suggest that taking on a reasonable workload relies on personal responsibility, which is a quality that the majority of Home Office pathologists have. University departments can ensure con-

tractually that all fees are channeled into the department. Regrettably, this may encourage some employees to leave work for colleagues, safe in the knowledge that their salary will be paid regardless of their contribution to the overall departmental workload.

We are puzzled by the assertion that *“it is a sad reality that histrionic skills may be more powerful than sound scientific analyses in convincing a jury. The greater the stature of the expert, the greater is the temptation to engage in histrionics in defence of a flawed opinion, out of arrogance and the desire to protect personal reputation.”* To our knowledge, this is not evidence based. One of the few advantages of working in a *“minuscule medical sub-specialty”* of 42 pathologists is that we all know each other personally. “Histrionics” is not a character trait we recognise in any of our colleagues on the Home Office register. We do not understand the relevance of this unfounded comment in the context of the editorial, and in any case fail to see how working in a large department might prevent “histrionics”. We do, however, recognise the value of discussing cases with colleagues, both informally and at formal audit and educational meetings, which are held monthly in our group practice. We do not always need to be face-to-face to discuss a case, finding telephones and the Internet suffice.

It is true that there have been some problems in the provision of Forensic Pathology services in England and Wales. Over the last few years the Home Office has worked very hard to try to ensure the future of a quality forensic pathology service, which has the ability to train and retain colleagues, while respecting the rights

of the individual practitioners. The negotiations between the Home Office and those who provide the service have at times been difficult, and there is still much to do, but there are signs that a sensible consensus can be reached. Publication of an editorial which relies on a weak pun for a title and snide innuendo for content, rather than accurate evidence and common sense, is unlikely to help.

Further Reading

1. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, baseline assessments; October 2005. Available from: www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk.
2. Home Office Forensic Pathology Bulletin, no. 3; April 2004. Available from: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/inside/science/index.html.
3. Code of practice and performance standards for forensic pathologists. Home Office and The Royal College of Pathologists; November 2004. Available from: www.rcpath.org.

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